State and society in pre-colonial Asante

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1 Varieties of the Asante past

Asante historiography and its discontents I

Africanist historiography has a very distinguished but incontestably short ancestry. Intensive scholarly investigation of Africa's precolonial past dates only from the 1950s. First, without doubt, among the leading themes that have emerged from over three decades of academic endeavour is ongoing discussion of the structure and characteristics of the precolonial African state. Scrutiny and analysis of this issue are contentious. This is most especially the case when the problem being adumbrated is refined to a close consideration of the precise nature of the historic relationship between given African states and societies. Thus, for instance, in 1981, in a very compressed but still lengthy survey of the literature then available on states and social processes in Africa, Lonsdale prefaced his observations with the cautionary disclaimer that his essay could 'only be one historian's view of a large and controversial matter'.[1]

The matter has indeed remained controversial, albeit in an inconclusive and generally unsatisfactory way. The chief reason for this state of affairs is that our analyses of state and society in precolonial Africa, and of the nature of the relationship between the two, are at once notably skewed and imbalanced. As a direct consequence of this state of affairs there exist very substantial gaps in our understanding.

In part at least this situation has arisen from recalcitrant problems with the data. It must be conceded immediately and without reservation that for large tracts of the African past conclusions are reduced to the tentative or the speculative by severe limitations in the historical record. This factor is undoubtedly important. But it can be overstated. For the more privileged parts of Africa's past the data are no worse and in fact are often very much better than comparable materials used in the reconstruction of, say, the 'ancient economy' of the Greco-Roman world, or the history of popular ideas and attitudes in medieval or early modern Europe.[2]

Evident lacunae in our comprehension of the most fully documented African states and societies have arisen, not from an absence of information,

but from the sedulous application of limited – and limiting – strategies of approach, analysis, method and reading. The problem can be adduced with the greatest economy by focusing now on the precolonial state and society that are the subject of this book.

The Asante (Ashanti) are a Twi-speaking Akan people long situated in the Guinea-zone tropical forest region of what is now south-central Ghana in West Africa. Asante society slowly crystallized in its historic form in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Asante state came into being around the close of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth (the conventional *annus mirabilis* is 1701, when the nascent Asante state liquidated the rival Akan power of Denkyira at the battle of Feyiase). Thereafter, throughout the eighteenth century and far into the nineteenth, the Asante state was imperially enlarged and spectacularly elaborated; and despite a period of British colonial overrule (1896–1957), the Asante state and the society over which it presided still exist in vital if modified form as a discretely identifiable component of the independent Republic of Ghana.[3]

Extremely dense Asante historical traditions are complemented by voluminous eighteenth- and more especially nineteenth-century European reportage, and by intensively detailed twentieth-century ethnographic investigation. It is arguable that the sheer abundant wealth of the historical record is quite without equal in sub-Saharan Africa. This plethora has enabled the generation of a very considerable historiography of which one commentator has remarked as follows: 'Nowhere in Africa – perhaps in the world – has a precolonial polity been more thoroughly researched than the kingdom of Asante, political center of Ghana's Akan peoples.'[4]

The nature of the state, the state as practice, is absolutely central to the discourse of Asante historiography. Equally apparent, however, are the gaps and deformities already referred to in general terms. In fact, because of the volume of scholarship dedicated to it, Asante is a supreme instance of the difficulties of approach, analysis, method and reading discussed above. Let us now enlarge the theoretical framework of the argument by way of brief introduction to the specific historical disfigurements of the Asante case.

The disfigurements in Asante historiography have arisen primarily because of an approach to the evidence that has the effect of combining a seriously miscalculated partiality – a blinkered tunnel vision – with a relentlessly mechanistic and ultimately self-validating analytic application. That is to say, existing readings and interpretations of the bases of state power tend overwhelmingly to favour two perspectives or lines of argument. The first of these is defined by its choice of subject matter; the second is circumscribed by its intellectual presumptions. These perspectives

are intellectually distinct, but they are not mutually exclusive, and in point of fact or achievement they often go hand in hand.

The first perspective or line of argument concentrates fixedly on the idea and nature of the political superstructure. At first glance this appears to be perfectly understandable. Elite political behaviour is of clear and quite obvious significance in any complex polity. And for precolonial Asante, as elsewhere, the historical record is most detailed and least ambiguous where it pertains to the historical facts of institutionalized office holding. The difficulty with this approach in practice is that it has created a species of hermetic or self-referencing analysis. In reconstructing and anatomizing in maximum detail and as chronological narrative the 'history' of an elite political order – a self-validating procedure not so far removed from Ranke's *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* – there is a very real danger, most unfortunately realized in the Asante case, of detaching and virtually isolating the history of the political superstructure from the history of the society over which it presided and in which it was embedded. The social order – society itself – is reduced almost by default to a passive, inert or 'given' status. It is presented as existing only in as much as it is susceptible to interventionist regulation by a seemingly autonomous political order. This issue will be addressed more fully below. For the moment let us simply note that even if we concede Jacques Le Goff's widely discussed point that politics remains the 'backbone' of history, then Asante political history is still very, very far from being the integrated, totalizing *social* history of politics that he and his antecedent *annalistes* had in mind.[5]

The second perspective is characterized by an adherence to what is perhaps best termed a crudely or vulgarly materialist mode of analysis. In this construction all motive is circumscribed by, and all action is determined from within, the simplistic boundaries of a quasi-logic of perceived material advantage. The sheer consistency of this quasi-logic through time is guaranteed by its mechanical single-mindedness. That is to say, the evolution and movement of the historical process are understood to be determined by evident success in translating imperatives, drawn from an unswerving reading or appraisal of self-interest, into the arena of coercive capacity or will. This is very obviously an elite perspective (and a rather Hobbesian one at that), for it simply differentiates rulers (or the ruling class) as being those most successful in the pursuit of a self-evident, self-replicating and objective range of material goals shared in by all. This is history with the ideas left out. In consequence, this perspective is directly linked to the history of the political superstructure by a host of instrumental but extremely facile behavioural presumptions.

This second perspective is grounded in a totally misleading sheen or patina of rationality. People – Asante people – are construed as acting in

and within the 'commonsensical' parameters of their lived, sensory, here and now material existence. And the material bases of advantage and power, in collusion with the history of the political superstructure, are of crude instrumental significance in all of this. Examined closely, however, the chimera of rationality dissolves into rationalization. Asante historiography constructs lopsided archetypes by distilling all of social reality down to a usable, mechanical framework of 'rational', materialist explanation.

The principal casualty of this second perspective is also the history of Asante society, and more precisely the history of cultural practice. This is either neglected, rationalized or marginalized in an epiphenomenal way. When indigenous concepts of belief, religion, knowledge, custom and habit, and patterns of thought – the leading elements in cultural practice – are discussed at all, they are either rationalized in materialist, instrumental and 'commonsensical' terms or, if refractory or otherwise resistant to such redefinition and reduction, they are consigned to a residual category. In the latter case, they are presented as being at best passively contemplative, and at worst exotically irrelevant. This is unfortunate, for meaningful reconstruction requires an integration of the materialist perspective with cultural specificities taken on their own complex terms.[6] This issue will also be addressed more fully below.

Gramsci, *annalistes* and others

Helpful in enlarging our understanding of the problems inherent in the two perspectives adumbrated above, and illuminating in terms of the history of society and of cultural practice and specificities, are Gramsci's remarks *contra* Marx, or more exactly his observations in refinement of 'classical' Marxist historical materialism.[7]

A Gramscian reading *sensu stricto* would argue that existing interpretations of Asante state power imply differentiation and the existence of objectively situated Classes *in* Themselves; that is, classes in unmediated relation to the means of production and the appropriation of surplus. Simultaneously, however, the argument would continue, Asante historiography (like Marxist historical materialism) is poorly equipped and even evasive when it addresses the much more intractable problem of Classes *for* Themselves; that is, classes in relation to the acquisition and articulation of consciousness.[8] A strict Gramscian reading is not attempted here. For a variety of reasons it is inappropriate to historic Asante society. Nor is this very surprising, for precolonial Africa was not twentieth-century Italy. Gramsci's *conclusions* are suggestive at best. However, the *procedures* or *lines of argument* that led to the formulation of these conclusions are of direct relevance to the Asante case.

Underpinning Gramsci's interpretation and definition of Classes *for* Themselves was the construction of his master concept of *egemonia* or hegemony. This was developed from his perception, by no means novel to himself or to his century, of a very widespread, even universal dichotomy in political practice between what he termed *direzione* or consent (with the sense of collaboration or subscription to leadership) and *dominio* or coercion (with implications of domination and force). He went on to posit a necessary balance – what he called an equilibrium of compromise – between rulers and ruled in any evolved or mature polity.

The point itself is commonsensical. The problem is, and always has been, how and by what means is this necessary balance secured and maintained? Fundamental and indispensable to this balance, argued Gramsci, was the operation or articulation of hegemony. And hegemony, he concluded, must always be a supremacy attained primarily by means of consent. Coercion, he urged (in elaboration of others, and notably Hume), was in and of itself a *necessary* but not a *sufficient* condition for the effective articulation and implementation of hegemony.[9] He went on firmly to root or locate the articulation of consent in the institutionalized practices – belief and religion, knowledge, custom, habit, patterns of thought – that together comprised what he termed civil society.[10]

The historiographical marginalization of Asante society and cultural practice is directly related to our present very limited comprehension of the historical determinants of Asante civil society. We have already taken note of the severe limitations that ensue from a fixation on the history of the political superstructure. And by the logic of its line of inquiry, as discussed above, the materialist perspective – in Gramscian terminology the implied identification of Classes *in* but not *for* Themselves – has also virtually nothing to say about the practices comprising civil society. In fact, the very concept of Asante civil society remains historically *in vacuo*; in as far as it exists it is anchored in a permanent ethnographic present, and bereft of historically situated ideas or precepts.[11]

Gramsci's insights are employed at various points in this essay where and as they seem appropriate. His concept of hegemony grounded in consent, as a number of scholars have remarked, is a most useful tool for generating a dialogue between the history of structures and the history of cultures, and for relating social and cultural practices to their mental, intellectualist and ideological representations.[12] His treatment of the articulation of consent has the virtue of liberating cultural practice and/or discourse from ossified, synchronic definition, and instead situates the meaning of that discourse in contingency and in the shifting kaleidoscope of particular or discrete historical circumstances.

Gramsci's concerns, procedures and insights, together with elaborations

and variants of them, are increasingly widespread among certain historians, sociologists and critical commentators on cultural practice and civil society. Gramsci's influence in general stretches very far, although choices of locution and language sometimes serve to mask the debt.[13] This is because Gramsci addressed himself, with sustained and formidable acuity, to deliberating on a series of problems that have come to be recognized – but only recently – as being of crucial importance in a number of disciplines.

Let us restrict our remarks to history and historians. In recent years historians of many areas and periods have tried to tackle the problem of relating cultural practice and its representations to the historically revealed structurations of social reality. In part this was a rejection of the norms of intellectual history as it was traditionally understood and practised. Intellectual history was (and is) concerned with the autonomy of cultural practice; its field is the phenomenology of culture, and because of this orientation it has no interest in any relationship of mediation or determination between cultural representations and social reality.[14]

The critique of this particular type of idealism was led by materialist historians (Marxist, *marxisant* and otherwise), by those interested in the history of *mentalités*, and by mavericks like Norbert Elias.[15] But to a greater or lesser degree all of these approaches were characterized by the same besetting limitation that we have seen in the materialist perspective on Asante history, and that we have noted as being central to Gramsci's critique of Marx. That is, cultural practice was marginalized as an epiphenomenon, and cultural representations were always reduced to some other classificatory category – social class, material conditions, the politics of coercion, or in literate societies (and as a dependent function of any of the foregoing), socio-political distinctions between the production and consumption of cultural representations (texts).[16] In varying degrees, many historians were bound to these categories by personal conviction; and those concerned with the history of *mentalités*, influenced by Braudel's promulgation of the successive economic, social and cultural levels of serial history, frequently utilized the same or similar benchmarks to reduce cultural practice to the statistically quantifiable.[17]

The beginnings of a more fruitful historical critique can be traced back through the historians of *mentalités* to the work of their mentors. In very significant measure the foundation of the *Annales* school was undertaken in conscious repudiation of idealist intellectual history. Febvre and Bloch were much concerned with the history of cultural practice, and with the insights regarding it that might be gleaned from other disciplines: social and cultural anthropology, literary criticism, folklore, psychology.[18] But as has been noted above, subsequent generations of *annalistes* tended to

'scientize' or to reify cultural practice, or otherwise to reduce it to some other category.

Other scholars went (and still go) too far in the opposite direction. They isolate cultural practice from social, political and material reality, often adventitiously, by means of an uncritical framing of its representations within the synchronic vocabulary of symbolic anthropology.[19] Thus, even if we accept the notion of a world saturated in symbols and substantively lived through them – as for example in Geertz's sophisticated treatment of the nineteenth-century 'theatre state' of Negara in Bali – then we are still left with nagging diachronic questions concerning the evolution of relationships in and through time. Not just symbols, but symbols of and for what and when? Theatre by and for whom, and when? Representations in what context, and from whose perspective? And how and by what means, and with what effects, does all of this transmute in time as it is lived through by individuals and groups in relation to the evolving conditions of material reality?[20] At its most extreme, presumptions about the special status of cultural practice – its isolation, its autonomy – translate all of its representations into the vocabulary of a master symbol, and frame historical interpretation accordingly. Sahlins' reading of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Hawaiian history as 'a political economy of love' (in which 'love is the infrastructure' and 'the erotic is the pragmatic') is a supremely elegant instance of this tendency.[21] Less dazzling examples of the same kind of myopic particularism are to be found in what has been called the 'new history' in the United States.[22]

Historical process cannot be reduced to crude materialism, but neither can it be entirely displaced onto a shadow world of symbolic performance in which, at one or more removes of representation and with presumptions of diverse or unitary intent, it *enacts* itself.[23] As Febvre and Bloch recognized a long time ago, historical process *expresses* multiple realities in symbolic and even theatrical terms, but it is not itself *realized* as a performed simulacrum of its own content. Thus, as we shall see, execution and human sacrifice in Asante were transacted as symbolic performances or ritualized texts; but to the state that prescribed them, and to the victim or oblate who played the leading role in them (terms absolutely precise in their ambiguity), performative enactment was a reference to and a corroboration of the actualities of historical process. Meaningful reconstruction, as has already been stated in other terms, requires an integration of material circumstance, action and consequence with the realm of cultural practice and representation.

This brings us back to Gramsci. His objective was class analysis, and it was undertaken in conscious enlargement of Marx's contribution. Although he strove to universalize his conclusions in the Marxist manner, Gramsci's

field of historical study, to put the matter in his own terms, was bounded by the evident disintegration of Italian 'feudalism', and the concomitant emergence and consolidation of Italian (and European) capitalism and mass society.[24] The precolonial state successfully constrained the emergence of capitalist production in Asante. This is discussed more fully below. To reiterate: rigorously to apply a Gramscian class analysis to precolonial Asante society would require a misplaced leap of faith. Gramsci's relevance, as has been argued above, lies in his procedures, his lines of argument and his insights, rather than in his uncompleted and often haphazard attempts at systematization. His propositions concerning hegemony and the articulation of consent in the institutionalized practices of civil society were intended to put cultural specificities back on the materialist historical agenda. He recognized the interdependent explanatory significance of both perspectives, and sought to effect a reconciliation between them. Something of the same sort of reconciliation is attempted in this book, and the themes introduced here are further refined in direct relation to the Asante material discussed on pp. 19–23.

Cultural practice and civil society

At first sight the failure to provide any adequate historical account of Asante cultural practice or civil society seems puzzling on a number of counts. First, an understanding of the relational balance between consent and coercion is evident in remarks attributed to some of the state's rulers, the *Asantehenes* Osei Tutu Kwame (1804–23), Kwaku Dua Panin (1834–67) and Mensa Bonsu (1874–83), and in nineteenth-century European observations concerning Asante.[25] T.B. Freeman, a Wesleyan-Methodist missionary who visited Kumase, the Asante capital, four times in the 1830s and 1840s, stated his perplexed view of the matter at some length.

> Indeed the Ashantees seem to pride themselves in the cruel and sanguinary despotism of their government: and hence, as the King of Ashantee parades the streets of his capital on the great *Custom Days* the women crying his strong names add 'Long may you live and be strong to kill us at your pleasure'; and the masses of men seem to take delight in the horrid scenes of cruelty which too often transpire; as though they would say 'Our King is a great despot and kills us as he pleases, and we all imitate him in our way and our sphere as much as we can'; and hence the wild dance of the public executioners before their victims ere they strike off their heads, or, in any other way despatch them: and hence also their occasional parading of the streets of the capital with pieces of human flesh in their mouths... In Ashantee despotism is seen *Out of Doors* as it were, without any concealment, at high noon, asking who cares? Who is afraid to own it? In any little village the visitor may as it were stumble on a human sacrifice, or in the capital an executioner may rush past

him in the street and nearly brush his dress with the human head streaming with life's warm current and laugh at his surprise and disgust.[26]

Freeman went on to contrast these paradoxes of participatory subscription and consent in Asante with the draconian system of state oppression that he had observed further to the east in Dahomey. There were, he noted, 'strange antitheses' between the two polities; Dahomey was 'despotism in the entire extreme', and Dahomean society was 'stagnant as the silent waters of a pool'; but in Asante, the state was 'more open' in its exercise of power, and it was mystifyingly 'sustained as such, by the peculiar prejudices, manners and customs of the people'.[27]

Second, despite very notable achievements, the precolonial Asante state simply lacked the infrastructure and technology to command society solely by coercive force. Historians have presumed a great deal concerning the instrumental efficacy of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century processes of Asante 'bureaucratization' (an issue which is discussed more fully below), and they have made much of the state's supposed adherence to a rational decision logic in, for instance, the implementation of foreign policy.[28]

But set against these putative advantages were massive, recurrent and often intractable limiting factors. Literacy was virtually non-existent; it was viewed with grave suspicion by the Asante state, and only achieved anything approaching widespread dissemination well into the colonial period.[29] The possibility of dissension at the centre was endemic, and intra-elite conflict was not infrequent and sometimes disabling; this culminated in a murderous internecine civil war (1883–8) in which the state's office-holding cadres did severe and irrevocable damage to the political superstructure, materially bankrupted themselves, and in the process lost much of their capacity to persuade society, let alone to command it.[30] Provincial rebellion and divisional secession punctuated the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the defection in the 1830s and again in the 1870s of the *ɔman* (pl. *aman*) or territorial division of Dwaben – one of the five core Asante *akan aman nnum*, or historically oldest and largest constituent divisions of the first rank – is the most serious but by no means the sole instance of the second of these tendencies.[31] Peasant rebellion, concerted or inchoate, was not a feature of precolonial Asante history; and this was the case despite the fact that the Kumase ruling elite systematically exploited a numerically huge rural underclass – both slave and free – that could never have been held in check by repressive coercion alone.[32]

The nature of the forest environment was the basic fact of Asante life, and the ultimate infrastructural and technological constraint on it. The core of the polity was situated in an ecological niche that was inimical and resistant, difficult to manage, and ultimately hostile. An important

illustrative instance of this factor is the issue of communications. The *ŋkwantempɔŋ* or 'great roads' that radiated out from Kumase were the channels along which the state's coercive capacities flowed. Two views can be taken of the *ŋkwantempɔŋ*. On the one hand they were triumphs of muscle power, organization and ingenuity. On the other hand they were a fragile, technologically underdeveloped communications system, subject to recurrent seasonal disruption and to very rapid deterioration if and when they were neglected.[33]

Let us take as a single example the vital governmental, military and commercial artery that ran south from Kumase to the Bosompra river, and thence onwards to the European settlements on the Gold Coast littoral. In May 1817, Bowdich found the road north from the Bosompra river to Kumase to be well cleared (by order of the *Asantehene* Osei Tutu Kwame), and in places it was 'frequently eight feet wide'; on his southward return in September, however, 'the rainy season had set in violently', and this same road was 'almost a continued bog' along which his Asante escort was reluctant to travel because of the 'aggravated difficulties' caused by torrential rain.[34] In the course of the civil war(s) of the 1880s this road virtually reverted to forest through neglect; Terry-Coppin (1885) and R.A. Freeman (1889) both commented on this, the latter describing stretches that were cripplingly obstructed by secondary undergrowth, fallen trees and swamps.[35]

Furthermore, no technological innovation was introduced to maximize speed or carrying capacity. The tools used in clearing the forest remained essentially the same throughout the precolonial period; although the Asante were familiar with oxen and horses, the widespread use of draught or riding animals was precluded by the disease environment; and while the principle of the wheel was understood in the nineteenth century, its deployment in the Asante forest would have required a road system of a type that simply could not be constructed.[36] Thus, the reach of coercive capacity depended for its effectiveness on a most fragile equation. To function at its upper limit of efficiency – that is, so to speak, to stand still – the Asante communications network had to be relentlessly maintained and renovated just to sustain operational viability; but a lot of factors, environmental and otherwise, could radically upset even these relatively modest performance standards, and intermittently, and most notably from the 1870s onwards, they did.

Third, the discipline of social anthropology, or more precisely the practice of British structural-functionalism – a tradition in Asante scholarship older than the historiography – did much to illuminate those very issues of belief and religion, knowledge, custom, habit and patterns of thought that are central to cultural practice, to civil society and to an

understanding of the articulation of consent. Two commanding figures – R.S. Rattray and M. Fortes – have dominated the anthropological enterprise in Asante. Rattray was a colonial official who carried out an extensive programme of research and publication on Asante, mainly in the 1920s.[37] Essentially he was a romantic folklorist, but he was also a structural-functionalist *avant la lettre*.[38] Rattray was 'so scrupulous, and sensitive an ethnographer', noted Fortes, 'that he did in fact contribute data that still lend themselves very well to functionalist and structuralist analysis'.[39] Fortes himself, who worked in Asante in the 1940s, was perhaps the leading practitioner in his own generation of British structural-functionalist anthropology. The guiding principle of this analytic method, he remarked towards the close of his career, was 'to trace out how things hang together consistently in a given social system'.[40]

Structural-functionalism has been severally criticized, but only one major point need be noted here. Fortes explicitly traced structural-functionalism's intellectual genealogy, or at least one of its major lines of descent, back through the work of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown to Lewis Henry Morgan's seminal and immensely influential *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1871).[41] But Fortes' view of Morgan was extremely partial. The matter at issue has been trenchantly summarized in the most recent treatment of Morgan's work.

> Fortes says in effect that Morgan is a much better anthropologist when we leave the history out, and he says so from the vantage of a tradition that has endeavored to do better anthropology by leaving the history out... Fortes avers, however, that Radcliffe-Brown got much of his structural-functionalism from Morgan, specifically from deeply reading the *Systems*. This interpretation of Morgan's anthropology is a consequence of the decision to assess it from the vantage of one of its descendant intellectual lineages... It is at one and the same time an assessment of Morgan and a description of the shape of current anthropology – or, at any rate, one version of it. Morgan's structuralism with the history left out is what anthropology has become.[42]

Structural-functionalism as practice concentrated on the nature of social relations within the framework of a permanent ethnographic present, and paid virtually no attention to historical process.[43] Freedman, himself an anthropologist, has summarized structural-functionalist practice in the following succinct terms.

> Concentrating on the study of primitive societies for which the historical evidence appeared (in the absence of any appetite for it) to be lacking or grossly deficient, practitioners of the mode created, often quite unconsciously, the fiction that they were dealing with timeless entities which upon analysis would be demonstrated to consist of an intricate mechanism of interacting parts.[44]

A great deal of Asante (and Africanist) historiography has been written in more or less conscious repudiation of the structural-functionalist tradition. It is highly unfortunate that in Asante historiography the